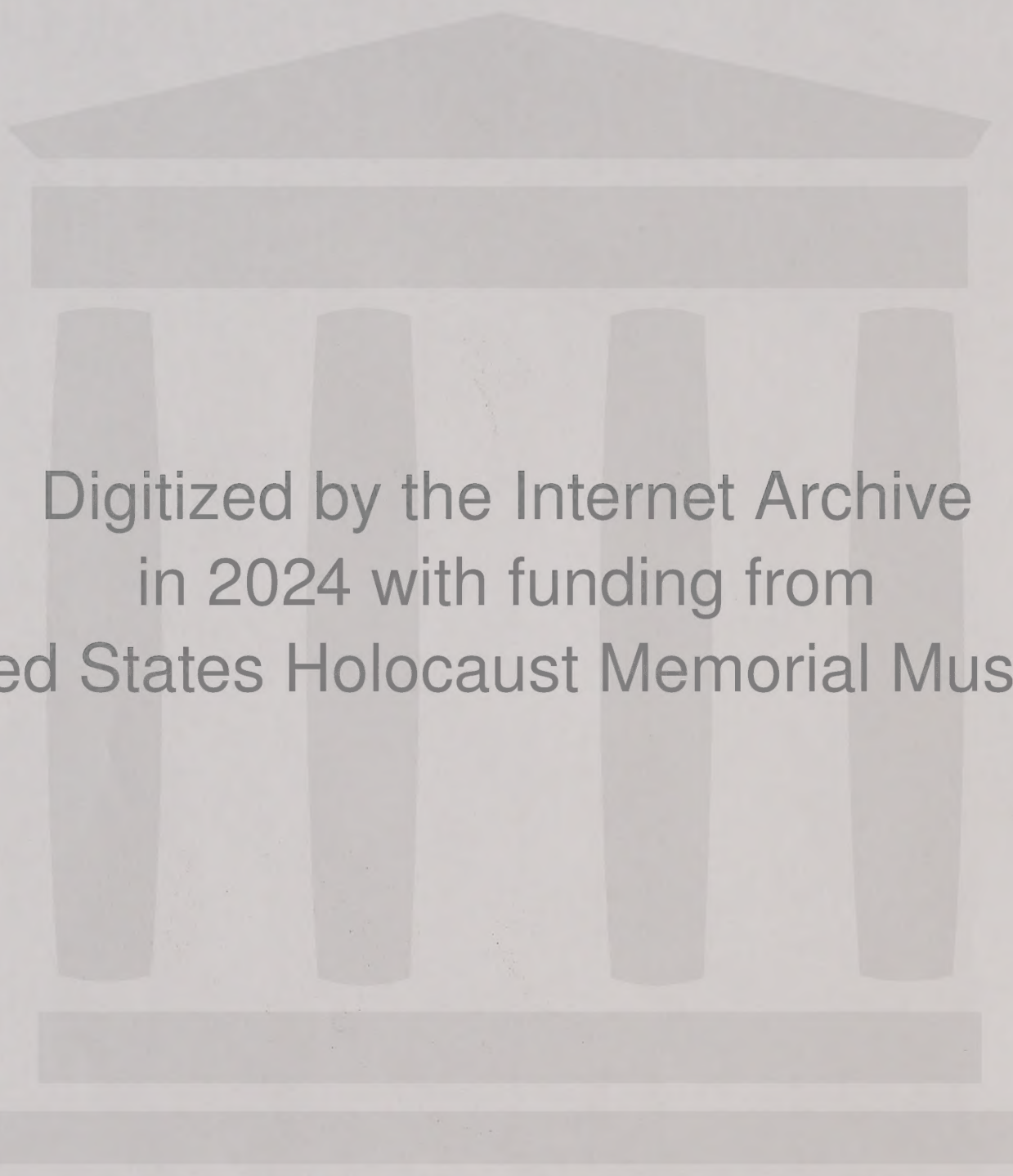




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## THE ESCAPE

Rena Berliner

The sun shone brightly and the air was fragrant with the smell of spring when mother and I marched through the gates of the ghetto for the last time. Our family was gone. Father was shot on the sands of Janowska Concentration Camp, and my little sister, who was only fourteen, was gassed in Belzec.

Time was running out. Lwow had only a handful of Jews left and we knew that our days were numbered. We decided to take a chance and escape. Mother, who had just recovered from typhoid fever, had sold her diamond ring. With part of the money obtained from the sale, she asked my father's friend Mr. Kurtz to buy us false "Aryan" documents and two capsules of "ciancali." Mr. Kurtz knew a lot of people and had "connections." This ciancali was a poison to be taken in case we were caught by the Germans.

And so, on a beautiful day in early April, mother, still pale and wane from her illness, and I marched through the gates of the ghetto for the last time. Both of us wore oversized raincoats, under which we had some additional clothing, and carried two small bags with our belongings. The money that remained from the sale of the ring was securely hidden on our bodies with some additional gold pieces stashed away in the heels of our shoes.

It was a quiet day with no "actions" and no SS standing at the gates. Mother and I worked outside the ghetto in a Wermacht factory. At work, we took off our armbands and changed clothes. Mr. Kurtz's "connection," a young Gentile man named Wladek, came for us. He was to accompany us by train to Warsaw where we were to stay temporarily with his aunt until permanent quarters would be found for us. Mother paid Wladek very generously for his services. Sentiments and compassion had nothing to do with it.

We walked with Wladek by foot to the railroad station - my mother first, followed by the young man, and then me - each of us separated from the other so as not to arouse suspicion. The railroad station in Lwow was swarming with SS, Ukrainian police and Jewish militia who were there to point out and catch Jews who were trying to escape by train.

Clutching my small satchel with eyes downcast, I followed my mother and Wladek to the train, when suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder and a voice speaking in







Ukrainian asked me for my papers. So many years have passed since that moment, in fact almost a lifetime, but still I marvel at the power of self-preservation and the will to live which motivated my reaction. I was only seventeen, sheltered and protected all of my life. I had never heard a harsh or abusive word spoken at home or elsewhere. When the Ukrainian policeman stopped me I yelled at him in the shrill voice of a real market woman, "Why in hell do you ask for my papers, me a decent smuggler who is just trying to make a living? Leave me alone you stupid bastard and look for someone else to pick on. Don't you recognize me and remember that I always give you some money for letting me through? Don't bother me and let me go!" The policeman's mouth fell open in total confusion and before he knew what was happening, I took out one hundred zlotys, pressed them in his hand, and walked on as if nothing happened.

Meanwhile, Wladek and my mother boarded the train and realized that I wasn't walking behind them. Mother became hysterical and wanted to get off and look for me when, a few minutes later, I walked onto the train.

On the train, we pretended to be strangers and didn't speak to one another fearing that we would be recognized.

We traveled all night, during which our papers were checked several times by SS men and Gestapo who periodically boarded the train. Each time it happened we froze with fear and clutched our bags, which held the ciancali, tightly. We had long before promised ourselves that we would never be taken alive.

It was morning in Warsaw. A thin rain was falling and we were glad to be able to hide under an open umbrella. We both looked rather cosmopolitan, but I imagined that everyone who was passing us was staring and knew that we were Jews. The streets of Warsaw were swarming with people, free people who laughed and giggled and spoke aloud. People who rushed to their jobs and had families. People who loved and played and led full normal lives. We were dead, finished. No future, no plans — nothing. We would live from minute to minute, hour to hour, and wait.

Just before we entered the apartment house where we were to stay with his aunt, Wladek spoke to us for the first time. He turned around and said in a voice devoid of all emotion, just matter of factly, "Look behind you, see, the Warsaw ghetto is burning. The Jews there thought they could fight the Nazis, but now they are finished — caput."

We saw thick smoke rising over the roofs of Warsaw's houses which were filled with life and we felt empty, dead.





How can the dying mourn the dead when they only have days to live.

